# Possibilities of Adaptation of Ukrainian Children to Czech Schools

Možnosti adaptace ukrajinských dětí do českých škol

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## **Abstract:**

The adaptation of Ukrainian children to Czech schools represents a significant challenge for the Czech education system and a topical social issue. The key aspects of this adaptation are language integration, social inclusion and academic support. Linguistic integration is the basis for successful adaptation, and schools often organise courses in Czech as a foreign language and use various methodological materials. Social inclusion includes the creation of adaptation groups and the provision of psychological support to help children better integrate into their new environment. Academic support focuses on adapting the curriculum and individualised approaches to teaching to enable children to participate in the learning process as much as possible. Despite these efforts, the level of inclusion of Ukrainian children in Czech schools often remains low, mainly due to language barriers and cultural differences. This article highlights the importance of developing support mechanisms and methodological support for teachers in order to increase the effectiveness of the adaptation of these children.

# **Keywords:**

Adaptation; Ukrainians; school; integration; social exclusion

### **Abstrakt:**

Adaptace ukrajinských dětí do českých škol představuje významnou výzvu pro český vzdělávací systém a aktuální celospolečenské téma. Klíčovými aspekty této adaptace jsou jazyková integrace, sociální začlenění i akademická podpora. Jazyková integrace je základem úspěšné adaptace, přičemž školy často organizují kurzy češtiny jako cizího jazyka a využívají různé metodické materiály. Sociální začlenění zahrnuje vytváření adaptačních skupin a poskytování psychologické podpory, což pomáhá dětem lépe se začlenit do nového prostředí. Akademická podpora se zaměřuje na úpravu kurikula a individualizované přístupy k výuce, aby se děti mohly co nejlépe zapojit do vzdělávacího procesu. Navzdory těmto snahám zůstává míra začlenění ukrajinských dětí v českých školách často nízká, a to zejména kvůli jazykovým bariérám a kulturním rozdílům. Tento článek upozorňuje na důležitost rozvoje podpůrných mechanismů a metodické podpory pro učitele, aby se zvýšila efektivita adaptace těchto dětí.

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#### Klíčová slova:

Adaptace; Ukrajinci; škola; integrace; sociální exkluze

## Introduction

In the 2022/2023 school year, 50,849 Ukrainian children attended Czech primary schools - for perspective, this figure is five times higher than in the previous school year (Czech Statistical Office, 2023). Although the war conflict in Ukraine is now in its third year, its consequences are becoming more and more apparent. Not only the initial data shows that the Ukrainian minority living in the Czech Republic cannot be thought of as underrepresented, as the Ministry of the Interior states on its website that as of 01.04.2023 there were 325,742 persons residing in the Czech Republic with temporary protection, under which access to education is also granted, and the proportion of children was 28% (Ministry of the Interior, 2024). Thus, the adaptation of Ukrainian children to primary schools is one of the key topics in the Czech educational process. Due attention should be paid to the most isolated children in order to facilitate the adaptation process, but also to teachers. It is the teaching staff who suddenly find themselves in a new situation in which they have to perform the "normal" tasks of classroom management, teaching, information and knowledge transfer, but often also the care and education of the pupils themselves, care for pupils from Ukraine, and with this not only the breaking down of the language barrier, but also the aforementioned crucial adaptation of children with migration (often traumatic) experience into classroom collectives, and consequently into Czech society.

There are now a number of methodological guidelines governing the process of adapting Ukrainian pupils to primary school, and academic support for teachers has become more accessible. However, these documents are mostly oriented towards overcoming the language barrier and teaching the Czech language. Although this aspect is crucial in adaptation as it is a precondition for the provision of education and the transmission of educational content, it is far from being the only one. Adaptation is also a social phenomenon, which is often neglected in these documents. More emphasis needs to be placed on the actual integration of pupils into classroom collectives, which involves creating a safe environment, providing psychological support for pupils, but also emphasising the theme of education for multiculturalism. However, achieving such goals can be challenging for everyone involved, i.e. pupils with a different mother tongue, their parents, teachers, classroom teams and school management.

Therefore, in this article we would like to focus not only on the topic of language integration, but also on the social inclusion of Ukrainian children and the possibilities of academic support. Although the article is imaginatively divided according to the respective topics, the different strands are intertwined, since, as will become clear later, adaptation is a process that needs to be thought about in a broader context. The personal experience of one of the authors with children from Ukraine in Czech classrooms also contributed to the choice of the topic. Last but not least, we look at the topic through the lens of social pedagogy, especially in the field of prevention of social exclusion and equalisation of opportunities, which may also represent one of the ways for social pedagogues to apply in primary schools.

# Language integration

Language integration is a primary issue in the integration of Ukrainian children into the Czech education system. Most of these children come to the Czech Republic with minimal or no knowledge of the Czech language, which can be an obstacle to their entry into Czech schools. Language barriers and cultural differences can cause anxiety and fear for both children and their parents, so it is essential to facilitate these children's entry into and learning in school.

Radostný et al. (2011) state that students who do not understand Czech cannot master the same level of learning required by the school curriculum for their grade. Therefore, it is necessary to prepare an individual education plan for them that is adapted to their current learning needs. This plan needs to be differentiated to meet the needs of children with different mother tongues and is usually called a balancing plan. This helps to realise the aims of inclusive education (ibid.).

A compensatory plan can effectively support the inclusion of pupils with a different mother tongue because it allows the pupil to work according to his/her current ability and pace, the teacher can adapt the teaching to the pupil's level without fear of not meeting the curriculum, parents are actively involved in their child's education, the pupil is involved in the planning and takes responsibility for his/her results (Zelinková, 2007).

The National Pedagogical Institute (hereinafter NPI) states that primary school pupils with insufficient knowledge of Czech may, under certain conditions (they have been attending a Czech school for less than 12 months), receive 100-200 hours of free language training at an authorized school. This preparation will help them acquire basic language skills and facilitate their integration into the mainstream classroom (NPI, 2024a). Teachers can use the *Curriculum of Czech as a Second Language for Primary Education*, which contains detailed educational content divided into ten thematic units and two language levels (MoEYS, 2021). Free language preparation is usually taught by a Czech as a second language teacher. Czech language courses for children, as well as adults, are usually offered free of charge by centres supporting the integration of foreigners and many other non-governmental non-profit organisations.

The Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports mentions that an adaptation coordinator, usually a member of the school staff, can provide support and assistance to pupils with a different mother tongue when they arrive in a Czech school. This coordinator helps pupils to find their way around the school and adjust to their new environment, usually during the first four weeks (MoEYS, 2022a). He or she also provides them with language support, which includes not only imparting basic Czech language skills but also helping them communicate with teachers and classmates.

For the linguistic integration of children with a different mother tongue in Czech schools, the teacher's approach to these children is very crucial. The National Pedagogical Institute of the Czech Republic provides ten practical tips for a language-sensitive approach of the teacher in the classroom, which includes pupils with a different mother tongue, as follows:

- 1. Involve all pupils (including those with different mother tongues) in all activities, giving them space to excel and integrate, and using simple language when communicating with them.
- 2. Use different means of communication (translator, pantomime).
- 3. Monitor the language level of the pupils and adapt teaching, tasks and assessment to this level.

- 4. Teach clearly and clearly using diagrams, pictures, graphs and experiments.
- 5. Structure the teaching with simply formulated minimum objectives and gradually expand them.
- 6. Respect students' individual pace and provide reduced materials.
- 7. Explain everything and actively ask questions to avoid misunderstandings caused by symbols, abbreviations and other culturally and linguistically conditioned elements.
- 8. Ensure that all students understand the language.
- 9. To promote the use of the mother tongue by pupils as an aid to learning.
- 10. Draw on and share the experiences of colleagues (NPI, 2023).

Communication cards can help teachers to communicate with pupils with different mother tongues. These cards serve to facilitate communication between the child and the teacher, between children and with each other, and also to express the child's basic needs and feelings (NPI, 2024b). Teaching staff can use the following methodological materials to help and support the language integration of Ukrainian pupils: the publications *Cesta: Ukrainian Children in Czech Schools, Pupils with a Different Mother Tongue in Czech Schools, Box of First Rescue for Teachers: the First Days and Weeks with a Pupil Without Czech in the Classroom,* the teaching materials entitled *Supporting the Acquisition of Czech by Children and Pupils of Foreigners - Methodological and Working Materials for 1.-2. year of primary schools, Methodological and teaching materials for 3rd-9th year of primary schools, How to work with free pexes and methodological material <i>Educating Ukrainian children in the Czech Republic.* 

Šafářová et al. report that in November 2023, PAQ Research conducted the seventh wave of research entitled The Voice of Ukrainians: children's education, which found that 64% of Ukrainian children aged 6-14 currently speak Czech in everyday situations, compared to 72% of children aged 15-17. It also found that 53% of Ukrainian children aged 6-17 do not learn Czech either at school or in Czech language courses. The increase in the number of children without organized Czech language instruction is mainly due to the reduction in the number of Czech as a second language classes in schools (Šafářová et al., 2023).

#### Social inclusion

The successful social integration of the child into the classroom collectives, and consequently into society as a whole, is conditioned by the child's psychological wellbeing. This process begins with the arrival of children in the Czech Republic. The Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (hereinafter referred to as the Ministry of Education) sets out a number of recommendations that should be followed before a child enters primary school. First and foremost, the best interests of the child must be taken into account, which is the priority in any situation. Once the child and his/her family arrive in the Czech Republic, it is essential to give them some time and allow the family the opportunity to "be together". It is necessary to realise that the child is leaving his or her current security and entering a new environment that is still unfamiliar to him or her. Often they leave behind family members, friends and hobbies. The family therefore needs time to acclimatise by providing suitable conditions for everyday life and for the child's psychological well-being, which can also be ensured by professional help (MoEYS, 2022a). This step is also kept in mind by the current legislation, as it stands from 01.01.2024 to

31.08.2024, which allows parents to postpone the start of compulsory schooling for up to 90 days (Act No. 67/2022).

Before starting school, it is recommended that the child adapt in adaptation groups, which can be run by school facilities, but also by a number of non-profit organisations, family centres and volunteer groups (Ministry of Education, 2022a). The child's participation in these groups allows not only contact with peers, but also the acquisition of Czech language appropriate to the child's age. These groups represent an important socialisation factor, as they enable the child to spend his or her free time in a meaningful way, e.g. in the form of leisure activities in the form of sports, being outdoors, or creative activities, thus contributing to the aforementioned psychological well-being, which is a determinant for children's entry into school (MoEYS, 2022a).

Act No. 561/2004 Coll., imposes the obligation to fulfill school attendance not only on citizens of the Czech Republic, but also applies to foreigners who are entitled to reside permanently or temporarily in the territory of the Czech Republic for a period exceeding 90 days and to participants in proceedings for international protection.

In addition to attendance at Czech primary schools, this law allows for other forms of education. However, the 2022 opinion of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, resulting from a meeting with representatives of the Embassy of Ukraine, recommends full-time education of Ukrainian children in Czech primary schools in order to promote the best interests of the child (Ministry of Education, 2022b).

In March 2023, a study by the National Institute for Research on the Socioeconomic Impact of Diseases and Systemic Risks (SYRI) was published, which focused on the course of adaptation of Ukrainian pupils to Czech schools. The results show further room for improvement and the search for additional ways to make the social integration of Ukrainian children into classroom collectives more effective. Selected findings of the survey show that the focus of adaptation was mainly on the acquisition of the Czech language, but the level of teaching varied from school to school and schools also approached teaching in different ways. The results also show that schools prioritised social adaptation over academic adaptation of pupils, but despite this, the level of integration of Ukrainian pupils into classroom collectives is still low and classroom relationships are ethnically differentiated. The results also highlighted teachers' uncertainty about the education of Ukrainian pupils. These doubts stemmed mainly from the level of involvement of Ukrainian pupils in the classroom and the issue of making reasonable demands on Ukrainian pupils (Hlad'o et al., 2023).

Approaches vary from school to school. Some schools directly employ Ukrainian teachers and fill positions in the school counselling centre with Ukrainian staff who are available to help children integrate into the classroom. They also provide a support mechanism for teachers. In practice, it also happens that children from Ukraine are concentrated in one class. This has certain advantages, as children can communicate in Ukrainian, help each other, express support and do not feel so alone in the classroom. On the other hand, however, the integration process can be disrupted, isolation from other classmates, avoidance of speaking in Czech, which ultimately can pose a risk of social exclusion.

Thus, based on the findings of the survey, the study published several recommendations to improve the socialization of pupils from Ukraine, which can be summarized as follows:

- 1. To promote social integration of children by organizing joint events for Czech and Ukrainian pupils.
- 2. Distribute Ukrainian pupils so that their share in the class does not exceed 20%.
- 3. Pay more attention to the academic adaptation of Ukrainian pupils and define appropriate educational goals.
- 4. To prepare Ukrainian pupils for the secondary school entrance exams.
- 5. Focus on identifying the specific educational needs of Ukrainian pupils.
- 6. Respect individual differences between Ukrainian pupils, who have different levels of knowledge and skills.
- 7. To implement activities in heterogeneous groups within the classroom to promote academic and social adaptation.
- 8. Provide teachers specialized in teaching Czech as a foreign language (Hlad'o et al., 2023).

The conclusions of the study therefore show the interdependence of the different components of adaptation and clearly demonstrate that the process cannot focus on just one selected topic. It is a complex and holistic process that needs to be looked at comprehensively. All of the recommendations mentioned above are directly relevant to Ukrainian children and how to facilitate their stay in Czech schools. However, we must not forget to mention the academic support and assistance also towards teaching staff.

# **Academic support**

Academic support is a set of support mechanisms that facilitate Ukrainian children's adaptation to the school environment. Within this support, we can distinguish the aforementioned academic adaptation, which takes place through language integration, individual approach of teachers, adjustments in teaching and appropriately defined educational goals. However, academic support also includes social adaptation, which includes all leisure activities, psychological care for pupils and the aforementioned adaptation groups, which facilitate Ukrainian pupils' adaptation not only in the school environment but also in the social environment, which is a preventive tool for social exclusion.

The research findings of *Voice of Ukrainians: children's education* show that children who attend group clubs as part of their leisure activities achieve up to twice as good social integration into collectives as children who do not attend groups at all. However, one third of children do not attend after-school clubs even though they would like to, but they are financially unaffordable for them (Šafářová et al., 2023). Thus, for low-income families, the Centres for Supporting the Integration of Foreigners, which are established by the Refugee Facilities Administration of the Ministry of the Interior, offer a possible solution. These are operated in ten regions. In the remaining four regions, the centres are run by other organisations. They thus cover the entire territory of the Czech Republic and represent a comprehensive network of assistance. In the year 2023 alone, the staff of the Centres for Supporting the Integration of Foreigners provided 152,815 interventions in assistance to Ukraine (CPIC, 2023). In the network of services provided, clients can then benefit not only from social and legal counselling and interpreting services, but also from adaptation and integration courses, socio-cultural courses and attend cultural events organised by the Centre for the Integration of Foreigners. Towards children and youth from Ukrainian refugee families, the Centre's staff facilitated contact with the UNICEF Children's Fund, implementing integration activities provided through other NGOs in

a joint project to create a friendly environment for children and youth from Ukraine (CPIC, 2023).

One example of good practice is the Kalyna Community Refugee Centre in Pardubice. The centre offers orientation assistance in a new environment, answers to individual questions, language courses for children and adults, assistance in finding housing and employment and psychological help. As part of its services, it also thinks about meaningful leisure time and organises interactive and creative workshops for children and youth, educational, art and movement activities, with services provided free of charge or for a symbolic amount, thus making meaningful leisure time more accessible (Kalyna, 2024).

Although the best interests of the child come first, we must not neglect the wellbeing of teachers who suddenly find themselves faced with a new challenge. All the materials governing the process of language integration, be it the aforementioned guidelines, communication cards or teaching materials, provide some academic support. The involvement of Ukrainian teaching assistants seems to be an appropriate way to contribute to the adaptation of pupils to the classroom collectives and to help teachers at the same time. However, this is no longer relevant, as the Ministry of Education does not envisage any financial support for their involvement in the educational process from September 2024 (Prokopova, 2024). A suitable alternative appears to be the already mentioned adaptation coordinator, for whose involvement, on the contrary, funds are made available for disbursement from April 2024. The latter assists not only the child but also his/her parents. He or she familiarises the child with his or her rights and obligations, the way of teaching, the school regime, participates in his or her integration into the team and also participates partly or fully in the teaching of the Czech language (NPI, 2024c). Another positive development is the wide availability of webinars, methodological videos and courses aimed directly at teachers. These materials cover a wide range of topics related to supporting the adaptation of Ukrainian pupils to Czech schools. Authors include, for example, META o.p.s. and the National Pedagogical Institute (NPI, 2024e; META, 2024).

Although some other sources of support for teachers, such as the school counselling centre or the still not so widespread supervision for teaching staff, are not detailed here, these mechanisms may not be sufficient for teachers. This again raises the question of whether working in education with children with a different mother tongue is a potential field of application for social pedagogues in schools. Although the position of a social pedagogue is not yet anchored in Czech legislation as a position of a pedagogical worker, it is the social pedagogue who is professionally prepared to work with minorities and can implement education for multiculturalism, is oriented in the field of prevention of risky behaviour, and his/her wide field of competence also covers the field of leisure time. In doing so, he or she can actively prevent social exclusion and contribute to equalising opportunities for all children, regardless of their background.

## Conclusion

Our intention was to highlight the complexity of the process of adaptation of Ukrainian children to Czech schools and the related need to develop support mechanisms, as the education of this target group is a topical issue in Czech education, social pedagogy and other social science disciplines that ask the question of social integration of foreigners into the receiving society The article focused on three key areas, namely language integration, social inclusion and academic support. These aspects are the conditions for

successful adaptation of Ukrainian children not only into classroom collectives but also into Czech society. Although the current situation in many respects cannot be compared to the time when the conflict in Ukraine broke out and assistance to foreigners has become more coordinated, there is still much room for improvement and it is essential to address this issue.

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